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DEPT FOR EUR/AGS, INR/EU, AND EUR/PPD FOR YVETTE SAINT-ANDRE

OSD FOR COMMANDER CHAFFEE

WHITEHOUSE FOR NSC/WEUROPE

E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: [OPRC](#) [KPAO](#) [AU](#)

SUBJECT: AUSTRIAN MEDIA HIGHLIGHTS: March 07, 2008

Investigating Committee Meets

¶1. The parliamentary investigating committee created earlier this month to look into allegations of abuse of office in the Interior Ministry will meet for the first time today. At the inquiry's inaugural session, members will vote on a chairperson - a position sought by both the Freedom Party (FPÖ) and the Greens. Austrian media do not believe that the Greens' candidate, the party's justice spokesperson Albert Steinhauser, will have a genuine chance among the other committee members against his FPÖ rival, justice spokesperson Peter Fichtenbauer. All major Austrian media report that the wide-ranging parliamentary enquiry into allegations of abuse of office and questionable practices in four Austrian ministries will be inaugurated on Friday. The committee of 17 MPs will address 32 questions relating mainly to allegations by a former top policeman of political interference in the interior ministry. The justice, finance and foreign ministries will also be scrutinized. However, the committee's first task Friday afternoon will be to select a chairman. The Green's justice spokesman Albert Steinhauser and Peter Fichtenbauer from the Freedom Party are the two main candidates, but the FPÖ candidate is believed to have better chances to be chosen. Fichtenbauer can bank on the support of the majority of the committee's MPs, among them Social Democrats who share the opinion of party floor leader Josef Cap, and consider the FPÖ MP a "moderate and competent person. Like the majority of Austrian media, ORF online news points out there had been "quite a tug-of-war in the past few days over the chairpersonship."

Inflation Affects Poor Families More Than Wealthier Ones

¶2. Labor Chamber (AK) expert Christoph Klein is warning that the current high rate of inflation is having an especially adverse impact on families with low incomes, who must spend a higher proportion of their incomes on basic needs than wealthier ones. He notes that with food prices having risen by 7.6 percent last year, poorer families also have more recourse to personal bankruptcies, which numbered 8,600 last year - an increase of 15 percent compared to 2006. If something isn't done quickly to help poor families, Klein warns, there will be even more cases of poverty and bankruptcy this year, says semi-official daily Wiener Zeitung.

OeVP Warming to Idea of Early Vote

¶3. So far, the two coalition parties, the Social Democrats (SPÖ) and the People's Party (OeVP), both dismissed all rumors and speculations about potentially impending early general elections.

Now, however, there are voices in the OeVP suggesting this might be an option after all, an Austrian daily reports. The newspaper quotes OeVP state secretary Reinhold Lopatka as saying if no way out of the coalition crisis was found soon, an early vote could be held quickly, even before summer. Lopatka suggested June 8 as a possible date for a general election. The OeVP governors of Lower and Upper Austria have also said they would no longer rule out an early vote. OeVP party leader Wilhelm Molterer underscored, however, that such a move was "not an option." All major Austrian media give prominent coverage to the increasingly persistent rumors the general election, which should be held in fall 2010 according to schedule, could be brought forward to as early as June this year. The coalition government is "drifting towards early elections," reads the front-page headline in semi-official daily Wiener Zeitung. The daily points out that OeVP party manager Lopatka's suggestion Austrians could go to the polls before the summer if the coalition crisis could not be resolved by April is a "clear departure from the OeVP and SPÖ's position on the issue up to now. While the daily quotes Lopatka as suggesting June 8 as a possible date for the vote, mass-circulation tabloid Oesterreich on its front-page says: "Almost a done deal: Early election on June 1." The People's Party, the tabloid adds, is already planning the motion in Parliament. Whether the party will go ahead with its plan "depends on how OeVP heavyweight and Lower Austrian Governor Erwin Proell does in the provincial elections on Sunday: If he secures an impressive victory there, the OeVP will push for an early vote," the newspaper suggests. Meanwhile, the Vice-Chancellor and leader of the People's Party, Wilhelm Molterer, responding to Lopatka's suggestion, has dismissed the speculation saying it was "not a topic" for his party. Molterer laid the blame for speculation about an early election on the Social Democrats, saying it was Chancellor Gusenbauer who had first raised the issue.

Terrorism Trial Defendant Claims He Gained Iraq Hostage Release

14. Mohamed M., the suspect charged with membership of a terrorist organization, has told a court in Vienna he played a role in the freeing of Hannelore Krause, a German woman held hostage in Iraq who was released last year. The defendant told the court that he had published an open letter on the internet pointing out that the kidnapping of women was forbidden by the Koran. He claimed that through his membership of the Global Islamic Media Front (GIMF) he was able to make contact with the kidnappers and argue for the woman's release.

All major Austrian media continue to report on Mohamed M., who is on trial in Vienna over his alleged involvement in a March 2007 video posted on the internet threatening Austria and Germany with attacks if they did not withdraw military personnel from Afghanistan. The prosecution also holds that in Internet forums frequented by Islamic radicals Mohamed M. mentioned the Vienna-based Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) and the Euro 2008 soccer championship as potential terrorist targets. Prosecutors allege that his wife, Mona S., translated Arabic texts into German for the couple's internet threat video. Austrian media also report on a "row" in court Thursday: Mass-circulation tabloid Kronen Zeitung runs the front-page headline "Defendant flies into rage in courtroom," and explains that Mohamed M. "lost his cool," accusing the court of not being interested in justice and carrying out a "show trial." Because the man refused to stop shouting, he was forcibly removed from the court room. The incident occurred after the jury was shown a series of graphic clips showing the killing and abuse of Western hostages abducted in Iraq that were saved on the hard drive of Mohamed M.'s computer. The defendant claimed, however, he only acquired the files so that he could better understand and deal with kidnappers, and accused the court of trying to influence the jury emotionally. If convicted, the pair faces up to ten years in prison. At the start of the trial Monday, Mohamed M. pleaded not guilty to all charges but acknowledged he had been active in the Global Islamic Media Front (GIMF). However, he disputed that the front had ties to al-Qaeda and described it as a media organization whose goal is the truth.

Students Killed At Jerusalem School

15. World leaders have condemned an attack in Jerusalem, in which nine people -- many of them students -- were killed, when a Palestinian gunman opened fire in a library at a Jewish religious school. Israeli authorities say the attacker was a resident of East

Jerusalem, and had entered the library with a concealed automatic weapon. He was shot by security personnel. Among those condemning the attack are Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, US President George Bush and UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon. At the United Nations Security Council, however, Libya has blocked a resolution to condemn the killings. Israel has meanwhile said this attack will not derail peace talks with the Palestinians.

Austrian radio in its early morning news Morgenjournal reports on the attack at a Jewish religious school in Jerusalem, which left at least nine people dead, many of them students. ORF Jerusalem correspondent Ben Segenreich comments on Austrian radio: "Jerusalem had been spared terrorist attacks for four years, and now a religious school, of all places, was the target of a massive and unusual attack yesterday evening. The Palestinian attacker succeeded in entering the building unnoticed. (...) It is believed the attacker was from a village in the East Jerusalem area, and therefore was in possession of an Israeli ID. Possibly, he may not have been hired by one of the Palestinian organizations, but could have acted of his own accord. Hamas has not claimed responsibility for the attack, although several of the organization's functionaries openly expressed their satisfaction with the attack. (...) In the Gaza Strip, meanwhile the attack was welcomed and celebrated. Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas however, said he condemned the attack. There is no reason to expect the blast will have political repercussions, though. Egypt is currently working on an arrangement to avert the threatening major confrontation between Israel and Hamas in the Gaza Strip."

The Super Delegates Could Decide

16. ... on who becomes the Democratic Party's presidential candidate, suggests the Washington correspondent of a leading Austrian daily. The newspaper runs the headline "Contest for the super delegates divides the Democrats," and suggests it will be the "party aristocracy that in the end is going to determine the outcome of the Clinton-Obama match." Barack Obama, it seems, is already preparing himself for a long, drawn-out competition with Hillary Clinton, the Washington correspondent adds.

Analyzing the Texas and Ohio primary fallout, Washington correspondent Norbert Rief says in centrist daily Die Presse that in the end it will likely fall to the super delegates to decide the contest between Democratic presidential hopefuls Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama. "Calling Clinton's Ohio and Texas results a Pyrrhic victory would be a little too strong, but she has not gained much from her success, either. At least when it comes to the number of delegates: She succeeded in reducing Obama's lead by a mere 12 delegates, while he remains ahead by 140." It seems "almost impossible that Clinton could still overtake Obama in the remaining primaries," Rief says, pointing out that her "victories in the three states on Tuesday were too narrow to seriously put her back in the running." Nonetheless, Clinton has continued her campaign with new momentum and motivation following her victories in Ohio and Texas. The upcoming primaries are "unlikely to win either Obama or Clinton the number of delegates necessary for the nomination, which is why they are both vying for the support of the so-called super delegates," Rief writes. Many Democrats, he adds, do not want the two candidate's competition to drag on until the convention in late August, and have called on the party leadership to "prevent the two candidates from tearing each other apart until the last possible moment."

Dozens of Victims in Baghdad Bomb Attacks

17. More than 50 people have been killed by two bomb attacks in the center of Baghdad, and another 130 were injured, according to Iraqi officials. Witnesses say a roadside bomb exploded in a mainly Shiite area, and was followed a few minutes later by a second blast from a suicide bomber who targeted the crowd trying to help the victims of the first explosion. A spokesperson for the Iraqi security forces has blamed the attack on al Qaeda, according to ORF radio early morning news Morgenjournal.

Kilner